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How a Satanist became the 'Man of Mary'

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

The Feast of the Assumption was Aug. 15, and to mark the occasion thousands of pilgrims gathered at the Sanctuary of the Holy Rosary of Pompei, one of the world's most famous Marian shrines. Among other things, the pilgrims celebrated the 100th anniversary of the gift of the shrine to the Holy See in 1906 by Blessed Bartolo Longo, its founder and a tireless advocate of the dogma of Mary's Assumption.

Beatifying Longo in 1980, John Paul II called him the "Man of Mary."

If every saint (and near-saint) has an interesting story, some are more interesting than others, and Longo's may be close to the most interesting of all. He holds the singular distinction that he was once a priest -- but not of the Catholic church, or even of the Christian God.

Improbably, Longo was a priest of Satan.

He grew up in a Catholic household, but fell in with a different crowd when he went to Naples for law school. Attracted to the 19th century "Spiritist" movement, he began attending séances, and eventually became involved in a Satanic cult. He was formally made a priest, and regularly conducted Black Masses and other Satanic rituals for the better part of a decade.

Eventually, however, Longo came under the influence of a Dominican who brought him back to Catholicism. Longo became a lay member of the Dominicans' Third Order, taking the name "Brother Rosary."

Longo organized a petition drive for world peace from 1896 to 1900, collecting more than four million signatures in dozens of countries. For his efforts, he was nominated for the 1902 Noble Peace Prize.

At the same time, Longo also led a petition drive supporting the dogma of Mary's Assumption. More than 120 bishops signed, and the petition was given to Pope Leo XIII. Some questioned the idea of a layperson meddling in theology, but Leo declared that the Holy Spirit can speak through any of the baptized.

Longo did not live to see the proclamation of the Assumption by Pius XII on Nov. 1, 1950. Forty years later, however, John Paul acknowledged him as the father of "the promotional movement of the definition of the dogma."

The moral of this story? If a former Satanist can become the architect of an infallible papal declaration, maybe there's hope for us all.

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